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Education as Commons, Children as Commoners

The Case Study of the Little Tree Community

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Abstract

This paper presents the emergent paradigm of the “commons” as an alternative value and action system in the field of education, and it critically draws out the implications of the commons for refiguring education and its potential contribution to democratic transformation. The paper delves into an independent pedagogical community, Little Tree, which is active in early childhood education and care, aiming to explore the ways in which children conduct themselves in accordance with the ethics and the logics of the commons and to show how they thereby unsettle the conventional meaning of citizenship. Proceeding from an enlarged notion of the political, the collective action of children and adults on social relations and subjectivities in their ordinary activities and intercourse in the Little Tree community are explored, and the dominant beliefs and ideas about the political ability of children are contested. This enlarged take on the political is crucial to empowering children and to enhancing their participation in public life. This pedagogical community is taken up as an instance of commoning education, that is, of configuring education as a common good, which is collectively governed by its community on terms of freedom, equality, active and creative participation.

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Introduction

OVER THE LAST few years, under circumstances of economic and political crisis, people are on the lookout for alternative political logics, practices, and ethics in response to sociopolitical exclusion, unemployment, and underemployment, the hollowing out of democracy, and environmental degradation (Kioupkiolis & Pechtelidis, 2017; Pechtelidis, 2016, 2018). They seek to carve out and uphold spaces of relative autonomy from the state and the market, exploring a different, collaborative way of living, which enacts democratic

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ideals, egalitarianism, creativity, community through differences, and sustainable relations between humans and nature. Education is of significance in this regard, as it can operate as a catalyst for advancing such processes of experimentation, exploration, and alternative social construction. The incubation of experimental and unconventional, nonformal educational projects is not new in Greece. However, in recent years, it has stepped up the pace driven by the general socioeconomic crisis.

This paper introduces the emergent paradigm of the “commons” as an alternative value and action system in the field of education, and it critically draws out the implications of the commons for refiguring education and for social change, in general. Research on educational commons, and empirical fieldwork in particular, is rather scant compared to other forms of commons, such as the digital commons or the urban commons, despite the fact that education is a cardinal institution of late-modern societies, and it is pivotal to social reproduction and change.

To inquire into the alternative paradigm of the commons in education and its potential contribution to democratic transformation, the paper delves into an independent pedagogical community, Little Tree, which is active in early childhood education and care in Thessaloniki, Greece. The community is run by its members, parents, teachers (custodians), and children, who construct an alternative pedagogical and social reality beyond the hierarchical and centralized bureaucratic structure of the state and the profit-driven logic of the markets. New forms of subjectivity and participation are crafted through the involvement of adults and children in assemblies, and there is an ongoing experimentation with new modes of thinking and acting. This school operates based on the decisions taken collectively by the three groups (parents, companions or “teachers,” and children). Its activities are informed by the values of direct democracy and various counter-hegemonic social movements of ecology, feminism, autonomy, and solidarity. Five teachers, 28 parents, and 15 children participate in the everyday school life. Children are preschool, from 2.5 to 5.5 years old. We take up this pedagogical community as an instance of commoning education, that is, of configuring education as a common good, which is collectively governed by its community on terms of freedom, equality, and active and creative participation.

The paper sets out to uncover the assumptions underpinning the operations of this collectivity, to critically probe its dynamics and its limitations, and to ponder the effects of this alternative, nonformal educational and political activity of the commons on its members. More specifically, our main objective is to explore the ways in which children act or conduct themselves in accordance with the ethics and the logics of the commons and to show how they thereby unsettle the conventional meaning of citizenship as an individualistic, postpolitical conception of political participation (Pechtelidis, 2016). From this angle, we bring out the experiences of children as commoners, and we seek to offer a critical understanding of how alternative subjectivities and childhood “citizenship” come into being.

In tune with conceptual shifts that have occurred in political theory (Rancière, 1995, 2010) and diverse fields of inquiry, from

anthropology (Scott, 1990) and sociology of childhood (Baraldi & Cockburn, 2018) to feminism (Butler, 1988; Lee, 2007) and “poststructuralist” philosophy (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Foucault, 1980), we proceed from an enlarged notion of the political, which is not centered on the state and the formal political system (see Kioupkiolis & Pechtelidis, 2017). In this expanded sense, which encompasses the conventional statist views but extends beyond them, politics consists in social activity, which deliberately intervenes in existing social relations, structures, and subjectivities in order to intentionally shape them by challenging them, transforming them, displacing them, managing them, or upholding them against challenges. From this broader perspective, political activity can take place both in the formal political system and underneath, outside, against, and beyond it, on any micro-, meso-, or macro-scale of social life, in more or less institutionalized and visible social spaces and relations in any social field.

Mobilizing such an idea of the political, we explore the collective action of children (and adults) on social relations and subjectivities in their ordinary activities and intercourse in the Little Tree community. We intend to question the dominant beliefs and ideas about the political ability of children and their right to participate in public life on their own terms. Policy-making and conventional politics are distanced from children’s views and their ways of expressing opinions and participating in public life (Cockburn, 2010). Policy makers and practitioners have settled on a narrow normative way of thinking, which focuses on the institutional, discursive, and developmental aspects of children’s participation, highlighting the regulation of participation by adults (Wyness, 2018). An enlarged take on the political is key to empowering children and to enhancing their participation, their well-being, and their social inclusion.

Participation is closely associated with children’s agency. The notion of children’s participation in the commoning process puts a practical and political spin on the idea of agency, which accentuates the capacities of children and their shaping influence within their environments (Oswell, 2013; Valentine, 2011; Wyness, 2013, 2018).

The commoning process, that is, the process of making the organization of education a common affair in which children, teachers, and parents co-participate, will be considered at two different but interconnected levels: the mode of governance and the educational practice. The latter will include both the educational activity itself and the figure of community built through this activity. In effect, commons in their diversity tend to display a tripartite structure organized around (a) a collective good (education in our case); (b) a community producing and administering this common good; and (c) rules of collective activity and governance. In this case study, we have decided to engage separately, first, with the modes and rules of self-governance (c) and, thereafter, with the collective good of education and the community created around it and through it, (a) and (b). Thereby, we want to highlight the alternative figure of citizenship cultivated in the Little Tree, and we want to recognize also the near inseparability of education and communal life, with its specific rules.

The Ethnographic Study

The analysis draws on empirical data garnered from a variety of sources, such as participant observation (ethnography), interviews with adults, blogs and internet sites of the community, various internet posts, videos and radio broadcasts, and flyers. The ethnographic observations lasted four months, during which the researchers took thick notes and recorded the daily life at Little Tree.

The research process was initiated in September 2017. A parent with whom we had friendly relations brought us into contact with the community. Thereafter, the researchers made preliminary arrangements and conversations with the members of the group (teachers and parents) to explain the goals and the content of the research, the methods used for collecting the ethnographic material, our presence in the space, and our degree of intervention in the daily routine of the community. The community debated in the general assembly whether to consent to the project, and it finally allowed the researchers to take part in the day-to-day activities of the community. More specifically, an authorized representative of the collectivity signed an informed consent form declaring their understanding of the objectives of the research program and their consent to participate in the interview/focus group conducted by the research team. In addition, field notes were made available to the members of the group under study.

The members of the Little Tree community, and particularly the companions (“teachers”), entertained a very positive attitude toward the research team and were open to our research activity. They wanted to help us but also to disseminate knowledge about their work more broadly. Furthermore, the companions were asked to reflect and to comment on the first draft of this paper. Their comments were very pertinent and enlightening. It is worth noting that the companions have asked us to contribute to their self-education through a lecture and a group discussion on topics such as the sociology of childhood and the sociological educational theory of Pierre Bourdieu, etc., in the premises of the community.

Furthermore, the researchers held an open-ended focused interview with the five companions of the community under study, which was recorded. The semi-structured interview involved both closed- and open-ended questions. Interviewees were fully informed about the research agenda and the methodology used. The researchers have fully anonymized all interventions from the children. No photos, videos, and recordings of particular, identifiable children participating in Little Tree have been or will be publicly used.

In the ethnographic research of this study, we mainly performed the role of the observer-as participant (a nonparticipatory method, see Gold, 1958). This was not a decision made by the research team, but it was taken in order to comply with the rules of community, which do not allow outsiders to intervene in the educational process. Hence, the researcher strove to remain as discreet as possible, although on many occasions, the researcher felt the urge to intervene in the daily life of community, prompted

by children to take part in their play and to communicate. In a certain way, the researcher was the silent adult friend of the children, although his role was not completely passive.

Education as Commons

In this section, we try, initially, to briefly define the commons, according to the current relevant literature. We introduce then the alternative logic and ethics of the “commons” in the field of education, and we critically discuss the implications of the commons for refiguring education.

What Are the Commons?

Commons or “common-pool resources” (Ostrom, 1990, pp. 30, 90) or “commons-based peer production” (Benkler & Nissenbaum, 2006, p. 395) consist of goods and resources that are collectively used and collectively produced. They are forms of collective ownership and rational management of material and/or immaterial resources that have been set up by different communities to ensure the survival and prosperity of each of their members. There is a variety of common goods, from natural common-pool resources (Ostrom, 1990) to workers’ cooperatives and digital goods, such as open source software (Benkler & Nissenbaum, 2006; Dyer-Witheford, 2012). Yet, in all cases, the commoners (the members of the community of the commons) tend to constitute a collective network of social cooperation and interdependence. Commoners tend to be in harmony with the natural environment, and they propose a way of organizing society that is sustainable for the ecosystems they inhabit. The commons pivot around a different logic, which is nonstatic, eco-friendly, and more inclusive than that of the dominant bio-power, which rules hierarchically not only humans but also nonhuman beings.

The “common” in the singular, according to Hardt & Negri (2012, pp. 71, 92), offers, thus, a *principle* of organizing society and collective activities that enjoins that social and natural goods and activities are made, governed, and shared by communities on the basis of egalitarian, horizontal participation. This principle seeks to effectively include all people in decision-making. It calls into question established class, racial, gender inequalities, and all kinds of hierarchies, such as those between leaders and those who are led, experts and nonexperts, professionals and amateurs.

The structure of the commons brings together three interrelated parts: (a) common resources or a collective good, (b) rules, and (c) a community of “commoners” who pursue the production and reproduction of commons. The commons are informed by rules, social norms, limits, and sanctions laid down by the commoners (Dellenbaugh et al., 2015, p. 13; see also Bollier & Helfrich, 2015, p. 3). In the context of this specific research, not only adults but also children are considered commoners: In the Little Tree community, both adults and children play a part in determining the practices and the rules of the community through their involvement in the assembly and the workings of everyday life in the community.

Commoning Education

The “commons” are understood here, more specifically, as a verb rather than a noun, that is, as a process of “communing” education and citizenship. *Commoning* is the practice of making and managing a collective good in a manner of openness, equality, co-activity, plurality, and sustainability. The fulfilment of these terms is never perfect, but it remains an ongoing aspiration and an object of lasting struggle (Bollier & Helfrich, 2015, pp. 2–7; Dardot & Laval, 2014; Linebaugh, 2008). The educational commons we explored is not a static reality but an alternative pedagogical and micro-political process, which continually evolves and challenges the logics of both the dominant neoliberal order and top-down state power. This commoning activity forges potentially new forms of subjectivity. It seeks to cultivate a specific set of subjective dispositions, such as: (a) direct engagement in public and collective life, (b) autonomy, (c) self-reliance, and (d) equity. These dispositions compose a “common” habitus, which can potentially challenge the core values of hegemonic neoliberal capitalism, including competition, individualization, political apathy, and indifference for collective life. According to Foucault (1980), the subject is a product of power relations. From this angle, the involvement of subjects in alternative, horizontal relationships of the commons can cultivate a subjective political potential that may contest the establishment.

It should be noted that the process of commoning education cannot be immediately pursued in all contexts and at all scales in the same way. Educational commons can take on many different forms. For example, a typical or classic form of educational commons consists in small-scale independent commons, such as Little Tree, where parents, teachers, and children construct a particular social setting, which responds to their specific needs and interests, and it is informed by an ethics of the commons. They do not conform to any official (state or private) standards regarding the organization of space and time and the daily routine. The participants in community-making and in the collective good of education, or “the commoners,” co-decide how to organize the space and the time on their own terms. They follow their own pace, and they work out their own time and space routines, even though they introduce some common standards or rules regulating the everyday life of the community. On the other hand, the ethics of the commons can also gain some ground inside public schools, which have to follow specific official curriculums and strict requirements and rules regulating everyday life, architecture, and the arrangement of space and time in schools, as imposed by the state.

According to Lewis (2012), who followed the lead of Hardt and Negri, and Illich (1971), schools should be un-institutionalized in order to escape the logic of ownership and profit and to chart their own paths beyond the boundaries of the institution, state control, and private property. He suggested a new horizontal politics for education, the “exopedagogy,” which is configured in the common space of the multitude. However, Lewis regarded all institutional structures of education as oppressive rather than as social fields that can be refashioned to promote progressive and emancipatory objectives (Korsgaard, 2019). Education is a public

good and a field of struggle (Biesta, 2011), which can be appropriated, rather than abandoned, by commoners who may set out to transform it in a democratic direction. Public education is both a resource and a threat for capital, like commons themselves (Bourassa, 2017, p. 85; Korsgaard, 2019, p. 8). Education is an activity that is not fully reducible either to the reproduction of the system or to revolution. It is an activity that enables both reproduction and the revolution of society (Korsgaard, 2019, 8).

In the educational commons, education is perceived not only as a vital resource for people’s well-being and self-development but also as a key instrument of political empowerment for both children and adults. This is what sets them apart from conventional education, which tends to be disciplinary and works in the service of private capital accumulation insofar as it promotes competition and individualism. Under the neoliberal hegemony, education becomes reduced to a private good and a commodity (Baldacchino, 2019). But it also morphs into a means of constructing docile, indebted, and “entrepreneurial” subjects. These two tendencies are acutely manifested in two patterns of enclosure in contemporary education. The first consists of human capitalization, which transforms people into fodder for a volatile and precarious labor market. Individuals undertake thus processes of self-valorization, pursuing “lifelong learning” and striving to accumulate credentials. The second tendency assumes the form of privatizing educational institutions and, more broadly, of turning them into sources of profit by introducing fees, student debts, etc. (Means et al., 2017, pp. 3, 5).

In order to yield, thus, a critical concept and practice of education, the commons should function as the constructive alternative to these modes of neoliberal capture (De Lissovoy, 2011; Means et al., 2017, p. 3). By thinking and performing the commons in education, we can advance struggles to shift common sense in directions that counter contemporary forms of enclosure along the lines of class, race, gender, and nation. The commons in education could animate attempts to transform the substance of our relationship to teaching, learning, research, and institutions of education in accord with the spirit of the commons. Education would be transfigured, then, into a collective good, which is created, governed, and enjoyed in common by all parties of the educational community. The co-creation and co-determination of learning would unfold on a footing of equality and in ways that nurture openness, fairness, equal freedom, creativity, and ecological sustainability, breaking with the profit-driven, competitive ethos of the market and the top-down direction of the state.

Pedagogy of the Commons and Alter-Pedagogies: Affinities and Differences

The ethic and the logic of the commons are embodied in an alternative pedagogical paradigm. However, it is well known that alternative pedagogies are multiple and assume many different forms. Therefore, it is important to clarify the convergences and divergences between a pedagogy of the commons and alter-pedagogies that vie for hegemony in the educational field.

No doubt, the pedagogy of the commons evinces many affinities with alternative, critical (Freire, 2003; Giroux, 1997;

McLaren, 1997), and utopian (Cote et al., 2007) pedagogy projects. However, there are also significant differences between them. People actively pursuing utopian pedagogical projects are interested in the processes of constructing “other” spaces and subjectivities “here” and “now,” on terms of equality, freedom, and collective autonomy, in a spirit akin to the educational commons. However, they tend to focus their activity mainly on challenging and, potentially, overturning neoliberalism through these alternative and experimental educational realities. In several cases, the radical projects in question diminish or overlook the possibility of alternative educational communities striving primarily for self-determination, self-sufficiency, and self-regulation or for shaping and maintaining community life.

Bourassa (2017) has shed light on the relationship between pedagogy and the commons by dwelling particularly on Freire’s (2003) critical pedagogy and Hardt and Negri’s work on commons and the multitude (2004, 2009). He set out to challenge both the “banking pedagogy” and the “pedagogy of the manifesto” by reading Freire through the lens of the commons’ theory, arguing that Freire is a commoner, at least at a theoretical level. More specifically, Bourassa (2017, p. 88) has claimed that Freire supported a pedagogy that contests the values of capitalism, such as competition and individualism, and fosters the idea of community, equality, and participation. However, Bourassa idealized Freire’s work and did not raise the slightest criticism. He did recognize that critical pedagogy is beset with contradictions and tensions; however, he has not developed this argument. Freire’s work is of great interest, and it includes, indeed, elements that resonate with the logic and the ethic of the commons, as Bourassa claimed. However, there are significant contradictions that overshadow them. A deconstructive reading of Freire’s work is necessary in order to identify and to activate the aspects of his work which could further the commons.

The emancipation project advanced by critical pedagogy (Freire, 2003; Giroux, 1997; McLaren, 1997) pivots around the critical analysis and the contestation of the oppressive structures of capitalism and the ideological operations of neoliberalism. From this point of view, it is argued that individual emancipation is not possible without wider transformations of society. The focus is on reflection and action upon the world with a view to unmasking domination and to radically altering the status quo. Hence, teachers play also a political role, which can help students to gain a deeper insight into power relations, which constitute not only social institutions like education, but also their own existence. In this sense, the “demystification” of social relations is a central objective of critical pedagogies (Biesta, 2010).

For Freire (2003), a “revolution” can grow out of democratic dialogue that unfolds in school settings among all participants (adults and children), who are “simultaneously teachers and students.” Under certain conditions, this dialogical interaction cultivates a “process of permanent liberation.” From this perspective, the aim of education is to emancipate students from oppressive practices and structures in the name of social justice, equality, and freedom. Therefore, in the critical pedagogy tradition, it is imperative to provide children with a critical understanding of the

workings of power. Only when people grasp how power operates can they question its influence and, in a sense, liberate themselves from it. This line of thought conveys the impression that emancipation can only be attained from a position which is not influenced by the workings of power (Biesta, 2010). It echoes the Marxist notions of “ideology” and “false consciousness” and Bourdieu’s notion of “misrecognition” (Rancière, 2003, pp. 165–202).

According to Rancière, this approach to emancipation reinforces a dependence upon “truth,” which is revealed to the people to be emancipated by the emancipator. As he put it: “Where one searches for the hidden beneath the apparent, a position of mastery is established” (2004, p. 49). Also, in the *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière (1991) argued that educational practices animated by this logic of emancipation result in stultification rather than in emancipation.

In the educational commons, students and pupils do not rely on teachers to explain reality to them. Rather, the main objective is self-reliance and autonomy and, thus, the emancipation of children from adults, teachers, and parents in the present (here and now). Therefore, the aim is to confirm the principle according to which all people are equal and the belief that there is no natural hierarchy of intellectual capabilities. Children are encouraged to see, to think, and to act for themselves, in order to realize that they are not dependent upon others, who claim that they can see, think and act on their behalf. The path of children learning and knowing by themselves is also a way to emancipation, where the mind learns to obey only to itself.

However, the role of the teacher is not annulled. The teacher assumes, rather, the role of a companion. They demand efforts and commitment from students. And they seek to establish that they carefully accomplish this process.

Korsgaard (2018) also explored the notions of “commons” and “communing” from an educational and pedagogical angle. He took issue with the politicization of education, which occurs when education is seen as a particular way of being together in common spaces that are not commodified by the market and the neoliberal state. He argued that this relationship should be reversed and priority should be given to pedagogy over politics. He submitted that the educational process is a collective activity that develops around the sharing of knowledge, exploration, and study beyond the neoliberal logic of ownership and the instrumental use of knowledge.

Korsgaard’s critique of “political determinism” is constructive. However, he claimed a neutral position both for his theoretical approach and for educational activities, which should be free from political conflict and interests. It is somewhat naive to presume that there are places unaffected by power relations. He suggested a narrow, liberal, understanding of politics. His perception of education as a common space and time is profoundly political since he actually proposed a different organization of educational life that opposes the values of neoliberalism. Education is inevitably tied up with politics as it gets caught up in the struggle between commoning and enclosures and it bears on the crucial question of what kind of society we want (Means et al., 2017, p. 3). The

“pedagogy in common” plays a great part in the development of real democracy, according to De Lissovoy (2011). However, no empirical evidence is offered to underpin these political approaches to the educational and pedagogical commons.

Korsgaard (2019) was perhaps right to argue that critical and leftist discourses unwittingly downplay education as a common learning space. Indeed, education risks becoming subordinated to political and ideological agendas, as it often happens in radical anticapitalist movements (Korsgaard, 2019). We should reclaim the school as a common space of study where we make things together, rather than as a political project or a means of struggle against capitalism (Korsgaard, 2019, p. 6).

Korsgaard (2019) did not elaborate on this idea of education as a space and time that we construct together with others. He did not set out the terms and the principles of this common space and time, nor did he ground them empirically. This introduces an ambiguity. Moreover, he claimed that the teacher lies at the center of education. In other words, he emphasized the role of teacher over that of students in the common learning process. However, children and young people take actively part in the commoning process of education, and they are potential commoners (Pechtelidis, 2018), as we will show.

Commoning Educational Governance and Educational Activity

As explained at the outset, the commoning process in Little Tree will be explored at two different but interconnected levels, the mode of governance and the educational process in this particular school of the commons. Thus, in the present section, we will initially deal with the mode of governance of the commons, the figures of community and citizenship that they create, and the role of children in the commoning process of Little Tree. Then, we will discuss the potentials of an educational activity of the commons.

The Mode of Governance in a “School of Commons”

Schools of commons, such as Little Tree, challenge in practice the institutional foundations of the hegemonic liberal regime, which divorces people from their representatives (the politicians). They introduce a constitutional practice that assigns an essential institutional role to the people. In other words, they contest the essence of representative politics. Decision-making process, as well as administration, become a common cause and practice which are co-managed on a footing of relative equality by all members, including children. Governance is transformed thus into a common good accessible to all members of the community on the basis of equality, enacting thereby a democracy of the commons (Kioupkiolis, 2017). For instance, in Little Tree, the assembly plays a pivotal role in the workings and the everyday life of the group. Companions, parents, and children participate equally and horizontally in the decision-making process. Decisions are an outcome of discussion and agreement among the participants.

Schools of commons, mainly through their assemblies, question the elitist bias of both the liberal and the Leninist hegemonic political traditions, which institutionally divorce political decision-making from the active participation of the people in the community. Moreover, they dispute in practice the presumption

underlying these political traditions, according to which laypeople are an uneducated and amorphous mass that should be guided by enlightened leaders (Kioupkiolis, 2017). Furthermore, the alter-political schools of the commons undertake a practical and meaningful transition from a simple and sterile rejection of the hegemonic establishment to a positive and innovative creation through the construction of a realistic utopia or a heterotopia informed by collective autonomy and egalitarianism (Pechtelidis, 2016, 2018). In these “other” schools, subordination to leaders and uniformity are put into question.

In certain respects, educational commons in general can be seen as part of a counter-hegemonic social movement, whereby the people involved forge a collective identity in terms of equality and freedom. The ethics of this alter-political movement enjoins people to partake more actively in public life. The political empowerment of the people turns thus into a major political predicament and objective.

Crafting a Commons’ “Citizenship”: Children as Commoners

Educational commons are usually focused around the various dimensions of identity formation in political, cultural, and economic life rather than the transmission of formal knowledge about rights and duties (Pechtelidis, 2018). In this sense, this process is linked up with the concept of citizenship, although it diverges from traditional citizenship as understood in formal education (Birzea, 2005).

In Greece, and many Western countries, citizenship is still considered the result of specific educational trajectories. Agendas and processes are established before participation gets started. Students’ participation is an integral part of citizenship curricula in school, where children are prepared for adult life as citizens who enjoy access to liberal democratic political rights. The dominant narrative views children’s participation in developmental and educational terms. By focusing on what is lacking and yet to be achieved by students, this approach disregards their actual activities as citizens in the present (Olson et al., 2014). Children are represented as incomplete social beings, as future adult citizens, and thus as individuals lacking a present. On this understanding, they will fully realize their social and political nature by following a predefined course of socialization (Pechtelidis, 2016, 2018). The dominant modes of children’s participation tend to be more regulated and institutionalized, whereby adult authorities consult children about their views and perspectives on various issues (Wyness, 2013). “Children’s participation is modeled on adult-driven conceptions of voice and democracy. The school or youth council offers a clear example of participation based on liberal democratic principles” (Wyness, 2018, p. 55). In this context, children “trained to be sensitive to the voices of their ‘constituent’ peers and the latter are able to practice the kinds of judgment they might make in adulthood as voters” (Wyness, 2018, p. 56). Therefore, electoral politics is practiced relatively safely within schools. In contrast to this view, it is vital to investigate and reconsider the lived citizenship (Baraldi & Cockburn, 2018) or the citizenship activity of children and their potential for social change

(Cockburn, 2010, 2013; Pechtelidis, 2018; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010; Percy-Smith, 2016).

Formal education locates at the heart of traditional citizenship the notion of “socialization,” which confines children to a passive and marginal position (Pechtelidis, 2018). By contrast, in educational commons, the notion of “subjectification” takes precedence over “socialization,” recasting children as agents (Biesta, 2011). “Subjectification” contrasts with “socialization” and “identification” because it does not vest children with a predetermined position and a fixed role (Biesta, 2011; Bath & Karlsson, 2016). Hence, it calls into question the notion that

political subjectivities can be and have to be fully formed before democracy can take off [. . .] A democratic citizen is not a pre-defined identity that can simply be taught and learned, but emerges again and again in new ways from engagement with the experiment of democratic politics. (Biesta, 2011, p.152)

In particular, in Little Tree, children are not socialized into a predetermined citizenship identity. They act as autonomous subjects through their direct involvement in the assembly of the group, their unconditional play, and their expression of solidarity. For instance, the companions convene the children’s assembly every day in the morning. The children are not obliged to participate. However, those who decide to participate must respect its rules.

COMPANION: Today Y. will keep the minutes.

Y.: I will not attend today. I don’t want to.

CHILD 2: But it’s your turn today.

Y.: I don’t want to be [there].

To implement the rules, such as keeping quiet and asking for permission when children want to say something, two children have been elected by their companions to operate as the coordinators of the procedure. It has been observed that this practice gradually reduced the influence of the adults, and it helped children to effectively control their deliberations by themselves. The agenda of the children’s assembly consists of a wide range of topics and issues. A favorite topic turns to the excursions of the team, for example, visits to museums, picnics, hiking on the mountains, free play, etc. All members of the group communicate ideas, which are discussed in detail during the assembly. Another major topic on the agenda is the everyday needs of the school, such as the breakfast menu or the expression of personal feelings and experiences.

The children in Little Tree seem to gradually assume more responsibility for their lives through their daily participation in the assembly procedures. They realize what it means to make a decision come true by their own means and power. Children learn how to work out solutions to problems and to organize their everyday life. The dominant mode of children’s participation in Little Tree is not only discursive. Although the concept of “voice” is crucial and it is viewed as an expression of children’s rights, participation here is not framed only in terms of voice. For instance, before an assembly starts, three girls are arguing over

where they will sit. In the end, they manage to find a solution among themselves through discussion.

Tellingly, before the beginning of the assembly, children allocate roles by themselves.

CHILD: I’m a coordinator today!

THREE CHILDREN AT THE SAME TIME: I’ll keep the minutes!

A companion appoints I. (a child) as a coordinator of the conversation, and directly I. becomes serious and responsible. So, I. starts allocating the right to talk to different children.

All children seem quite familiar with the processes of deliberation, collective thinking, and decision-making.

L. (CHILD): I agree to play the spider game, [but] basically can I suggest something?

COORDINATOR (I.): Have you finished?

COMPANION: L., do you mean that you will say what you want at a second round of the discussion?

L. nods affirmatively.

COORDINATOR: Now, whoever raises their hand, they will speak.

The importance of children participating in collective decision-making is also reflected in the following quotes:

COMPANION 1: A schoolgirl who attends the first primary school was somehow offended in her new school and told her teacher to hold an assembly to decide together how to handle this.

COMPANION 2: During an excursion to the White Tower, an important decision had to be made, and the children called for a meeting on their own. The children found solutions by themselves [. . .] We were surprised at it!

The children were free to express their beliefs about the children’s assembly:

CHILD 1: We are doing well, talking, listening and talking about topics, making suggestions. [. . .] but it cuts us off.

CHILD 2: They interrupt us from the game, but I like the assembly. We are giving up everything, and we go to an assembly.

Children are regarded as capable of making decisions and of shaping their everyday lives. Hence, through their everyday practices, they experience and they perform the role of the active citizen within the boundaries of a micro-community. The emphasis in Little Tree is placed firmly on the present of children’s life, which is not sacrificed in the name of a successful adult future (Pechtelidis, 2018).

Commoning the Educational Process

In educational commons, it is not only the mode of governance that becomes more cooperative and egalitarian. Learning processes themselves turn into a collective good which is coproduced by all members of the community. We turn now to this core aspect of learning commons, its educational praxis, and we examine thereafter the specific figure of community underlying it.

Crucially, teachers become here facilitators and “friends,” helping students to become self-directing, creative individuals, learners and “commoners,” who draw on the commons of knowledge, but they also embark on their own innovative explorations, renovating and expanding inherited knowledge. Even as they acquaint students with a given body of knowledge, the teacher negotiates with them the terms of learning and apprenticeship, forsaking the position of the master who transmits a fixed, authoritative knowledge (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; MacNaughton, 2005; Olsson, 2009). The teacher treats students as equally capable actors who bear singular capacities and creative energies and can navigate their own course through the commons of knowledge.

To illustrate, in the *educational praxis* of the Little Tree Community, before an activity takes place, companions usually ask children: “Do you want . . . ? What would you like to do about it?” They suggest, they recommend, and they offer guidance, but they do not order or command. They set limits in a discreet manner, without raising their voices. A companion rarely raises their voice or gives a command.

COMPANION: Where are you going, P.?

P. (HOLDING A PLATE): Here . . . Oh, I did not wash my hands.

COMPANION: Do you want to leave your plate here?

P.: No.

P. took the plate with the food to the toilet.

The companion did not instruct P. what to do. P. was free to choose, even if the act seemed rather odd.

Adult coaching and support for children can assume various forms (Cockburn, 2010). Companions seek to avoid excessive interference and obtrusive guidance. They try to remain discreet and to let children freely express themselves and configure their reality in their own manner. The companions seek thus to empower children and to enable them to take initiatives in the school without their assistance, bolstering their agency. This is the main objective.

Educating children in ways that enhance their autonomy and self-reliance is a systematic and sustained endeavor. This brings about educational and transformative effects within few months.

N.: I cannot put on my boot.

The companion did not help N. She let N. try for more than five minutes. She did not urge N. to wear boots quickly. She gave N. the necessary time, and she guided patiently when needed.

Two further examples illustrate the pedagogic process of empowering children. First, a new poster that we noticed in the

room, read: “Do not hit each other.” A companion informed us that the children decided about it in the last assembly.

Second, they decided about the construction of their space.

E.: I don't like the branches on the green door.

After discussion and many suggestions, the children agreed to take the branches off and to paint the door.

N.: Let's remove them but paint our figures on the door.

Finally, children and companions, who worked together until the end of the day, painted the door.

The starting point of the learning process is the individual needs of each child “here and now.” Most triggers are spontaneous, such as an idea or a piece of material that can initiate an informal learning activity. The “curriculum” becomes now open, elaborated, and readapted by the commoners in a dynamic way, which responds to the circumstances and the needs of children and adults. Knowledge outcomes are not predetermined, and the limits of the learning process are not settled in advance. The interconnectedness of learning is highlighted and cultivated (Gillies, n.d.; MacNaughton, 2005; Olsson, 2009).

Turning now to the kind of community and sociability cultivated in the educational practice of Little Tree, it should be noted that, very often, children and adults interact with one another in familiar terms, “as if they are relatives,” as a companion said. This is quite similar to the “critical friend” pedagogical approach, whereby the teacher establishes a close relationship with children without assuming the status of an adult authority (Costa & Kallick, 1995). According to this approach, the “critical friend” is a reliable person who does not provide ready-made ideas, knowledge, and solutions but raises challenging questions.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that no child turned to companions (“Miss, Miss”) to resolve differences with another child. And if there was a fight among children, the remedy was redress rather than punishment. As S. (a companion) put it, “Our pedagogical approach does not fit the concept of punishment at all . . .” Instead of punishment, companions voiced disapproval of acts that violated community rules. For example, if a child breaks a rule, the companions enjoin them to leave the room and to move to another place. This kind of “intervention” by companions is intended to promote self-direction and the ultimate attainment of autonomy by children themselves. It is telling that companions prefer the term “intervention,” which implies influence, mutual consent, and agreement, to “guidance,” which entails for them enforcement and sovereign imposition in line with predominant social standards.

More specifically, companions foster participation, cooperation, and sharing, which constitute cardinal values in Little Tree's culture. Children are constantly prompted by companions to cooperate:

ONE CHILD TO ANOTHER: Do you want me to make X material and you Y, because I know Y?

V. (COMPANION): Because we are three, you can do both [X, Y] together.

The notion of sharing is likewise nurtured among children. However, this is not a simple issue. Some children, under certain conditions, tend to be more receptive to sharing.

GIRL (TO BOYS): You cannot keep all the pillows for yourselves alone.

BOYS (IGNORING THE GIRLS): We are pirates!

THE COMPANION INTERVENES: Pillows are neither yours nor mine. They belong to the school, and you have to share them.

In the Little Tree school, children actively engage in the social life of their community. Their involvement constantly evolves through new ways of participating and experimenting. The alter- or hetero-pedagogical approach of Little Tree questions the traditional discourses on children, which construe them as passive, weak, defective, and ignorant beings who are lacking not only in knowledge, capabilities, and skills but also in learning capacity (Pechtelidis, 2018). Companions challenge in effect the predominant relations of dependence between children and adults.

Dependence, in general, implies vulnerability and precariousness. In certain cases, it involves forms of power that threaten and degrade our existence (Butler, 2015). This is particularly evident when it comes to children, who are considered vulnerable by nature, and they are assigned a lower status in the hegemonic discourse on childhood (Jenks, 1996). However, “dependence” can assume many forms. In other words, it is ambiguous, contestable, and multivalent. In Little Tree, it becomes clear that reliance on one another is inevitable and necessary because *everyone*, rather than children alone, is deemed vulnerable. Nobody can survive and prosper without interdependence and a supportive environment.

This explains why the value of the community itself is of paramount importance for the members of the Little Tree. It is a basic component and a tool in the political socialization of the subjects who partake in the daily routine of the collectivity. Significantly, the companions highlight in every possible way the value vested in the community:

COMPANION A: We somehow tried to build the community through and around the “school” [...] We wanted to craft a form of community organization for adults, too, who somehow rely on self-organization and autonomy. That is, we are not funded by the state, and we rely on the forces of the people who decide about the community...

COMPANION B: We draw our principles from Lobrot’s model of “interfering non-directivity,” the “active schools,” and a Spanish anarchist school, where participants operate as relatives. We do not understand affinity in terms of blood but in terms of community. In this community, all contribute selflessly in their own way.

The recognition and realization of the value of community opens cracks in the current postpolitical regimes, and it counters the workings of neoliberal power which proceed through individualization and antagonism. Children are both the target and the instrument of disciplinary power in the formal educational system. Disciplinary power bears an educational dimension in the sense that it transmits information and knowledge to subjects in order to extract information, knowledge, and skills in the near future. We could argue that children in Little Tree learn to contest the disciplinary power of the state and the market, which seeks to dissolve collective life and to shape productive and docile subjects (Foucault, 1995). The making of a collective subjectivity is actively pursued and performed by children. Many children said they were hungry during an assembly, which went on for long. Then, the meeting coordinator (child) intervened and said: *Let each one say one word because it’s time to eat, and everyone is hungry. Anyone who wants to raise their hand should do it now.*

On the whole, thus, the pedagogical practice of the commons in Little Tree unsettles and questions the predominant discourses on childhood, children, and their political capacity.

Conclusion

Little Tree is not only an informal educational setting but also a political one. We construe it as heteropolitical, that is, as an instance of alternative politics, because it promotes experimentation in thought and action beyond the top-down, bureaucratic structures of the state and the profit-driven market logics. Furthermore, it seems to nourish a specific heteropolitical habitus (Kioupkiolis & Pechtelidis, 2017; Pechtelidis, 2018) of the commons, which consists in the dispositions of (a) direct involvement in public and collective life, (b) autonomy, and (c) self-reliance. Little Tree engages in a process of sharing knowledge, of opening up education and citizenship to all social actors, including adults as well as children on a footing of equality, interdependence, and autonomy.

Furthermore, Little Tree as a pedagogical commons disrupts the conventional division between teachers and students. Students and teachers seek to communicate beyond hierarchical orders and identities by engaging in a process of common inquiry and learning, which is inventive, ongoing, critical, in the world, and with each other (Bourassa, 2017, p. 81).

Although mainly adults initiate the commoning processes, children play an active role in these practices, which they conceptualize and enrich with their own experience and views. Adults try to avoid too much interference. They carve out a space for children to express themselves freely and to shape the process in their own terms. Children themselves are constrained by age. However, they have the ability to influence educational life as a whole and to partly steer the process of subjectification (Pechtelidis, 2018).

The process of commoning education is built inter-generationally, and it is contingent, unpredictable, and open. However, more empirical inquiries into the views and perceptions of children are in order, as the adult perspective (teachers, parents, and researchers) usually dominates the new field of educational and pedagogical commons. Likewise, it is necessary

to conduct more empirically grounded research in educational commons and initiatives that pursue alternative methods of learning and building diverse communities and subjectivities, within formal, informal, and nonformal education. We need many different accounts of the rituals, practices, and mentalities that are produced within the educational settings of the commons in order to bring out how alternative subjectivities can be forged on a basis of equality, collective freedom, autonomy, and creativity.

Autonomous small-scale commons, such as Little Tree, usually struggle with a basic constraint: funding. There are cases in which commoners cannot afford the cost (Pechtelidis et al., 2015; Pechtelidis, 2018). Several commoners argue that the state should financially and legally support the commons (Bollier, 2014). They claim that most governments subsidize and otherwise assist new businesses to develop and flourish. In this sense, they demand state policies that will be friendly to the commons, providing funding, resources, and legal protection but also overseeing them. At the same time, the state should avoid too much interference in the management of the commons, since a heavy state involvement would undermine the autonomous processes intrinsic to the commons.

From this point of view, commoners, citizens, and researchers of the commons could explore (a) the ability of educational commons, as a component of contemporary social movements, to influence public policy in order to introduce policies and legislation that will enable educational commons to develop autonomously and under the economic and legal aegis of a commons-friendly state; and (b) the possibility of commoning public education, that is, of letting the logic and the ethics of the commons unfold within the formal educational system. Education can be organized as an institution of the commons, in which knowledge is a common good and education is based on open access to ideas, instruction, and information. A model of collective and equal management of knowledge and education goes hand in hand with the self-organization of the various educational communities, where all decisions are subject to democratic participation processes.

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